Writing Center Journal

Volume 39
Issue 1 *Volume 39 Issue 1 / Volume 39 Issue 2*

Article 4

12-1-2021

Unicorn Status, Queer Activism, and Bullied Laboring: LGBTQ Writing Center Directors Reflect on Invisible Work

Travis Webster
Virginia Tech

Follow this and additional works at: https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/wcj

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons, and the Language and Literacy Education Commons

Recommended Citation
Webster, Travis (2021) "Unicorn Status, Queer Activism, and Bullied Laboring: LGBTQ Writing Center Directors Reflect on Invisible Work," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 39 : Iss. 1, Article 4.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1959

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

Travis Webster

Unicorn Status, Queer Activism, and Bullied Laboring: LGBTQ Writing Center Directors Reflect On Invisible Work

---

Abstract

This article showcases interviews with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) writing center directors about their administrative work. In it, findings reveal that participant work distinctly departs from recent empirical writing center research about labor (Geller & Denny, 2013; Caswell, Grutsch McKinney, & Jackson, 2016), particularly in ways that practitioners' invisible administrative work is informed and complicated by their LGBTQ identities. Across 20 interviews, participants communicated that their work extends to making queer activist space through their writing centers; to supporting tutors, students, and colleagues of all orientations with issues central to queer communities and mental health; and to navigating tense interpersonal terrain, especially bullying. In closing, the article calls for disciplinary responses and resources to make for more equitable labor landscapes for LGBTQ writing center practitioners.

In conversation at a recent International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) conference, two other queer[1] writing center directors and I spoke about our work lives. Just that week, I, an openly gay writing center director at my then-institution in Texas, helped a transgender tutor navigate their coming-out process to other tutors, and I felt pushback during a staff meeting in which I noted that writing centers could house social justice missions. At the IWCA conference, I heard that one colleague had just been asked to serve on a campus climate committee to offer a queer voice. Another colleague, having recently left one administrative post for another, confided how being bullied at his previous institution—namely being called homophobic slurs—impacted his ability to lead his center and support his tutors; being bullied and responding to such treatment, he said, was its own kind of work. In wrapping up our conversation, we noted that writing centers led by queer people signal distinct labors, and we commented, somewhat in jest, that many non-queer writing center colleagues often disregard such claims as mere lore and often think these claims are of little consequence.

Since that conversation, I have sought to understand relationships between queer identities and administrative posts, in particular the kind of work that takes place when queer people take on writing center directorships. This article uses material gathered from semi-structured interviews with 20 LGBTQ writing center directors to highlight the ways in which such directors see their labor being impacted by their queer identities. To date, empirical writing center research has not delved into queer writing center directors' labor though many projects have uncovered queer lenses for writing center work: Harry C. Denny's (2010) book-length study has acted as the writing center field's primary text about a spectrum of intersectionalities, while some of Denny's (2005; 2013) other work along with Michele Eodice's (2010) and Jonathan Doucette's (2011) work has afforded practitioners the possibilities of queer, sometimes subversive, lenses for writing center praxis. Similarly, Denny, Robert Mundy, Liliana M. Naydan, Richard Sévère, & Anna Sicari's (2019) *Out in the Center: Public Controversies and Private Struggles* examined how tutors and directors' intersectional identities interface with 21st century public discourse in writing center spaces.

Even in the writing center field's most recent and rich empirical study of labor, *The Working Lives of New Writing Center Directors*, authors Nicole I.

---

[1] For brevity's sake, I use the word "queer" as an interchangeable stand-in for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ). I am aware personally and professionally that the word "queer" holds distinct histories and politics that do not always align with western culture's acronym "LGBTQ." With this said, I feel the word "queer" is more readable on the page than the acronym "LGBTQ" so I have chosen to use it to reduce the number of times the acronym appears.

https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/wcj/vol39/iss1/4
DOI: 10.7771/2832-9414.1959

Caswell, Jackie Grutsch McKinney, & Rebecca Jackson (2016) concluded with the "unsaid" of participant work, especially that which they "expected would enter [their] conversations," such as "gender, race, sexuality, religion, (dis)abilities, marital or family status, and social class" (p. 180) but which participants of that study did not share or note as relevant. My article speaks to one such "unsaid" intersection—that of writing center administrative labor and queer identity—at a key moment in western culture's history, in which queer people face concurrent progression, regression, and oppression and whereby equity for minorities at work, a major framework for my article's conclusion, is critical.

Defining Invisible Labor in Queer Writing Center Contexts

Work[2] is what the queer writing center directors profiled in this article did *for a living*. Researchers have defined *labor* to name work that represents practitioners' job descriptions, scholarly participation and production, and mediation of and resolution in interpersonal professional contexts (Geller & Denny 2013; Caswell, Grutsch McKinney, & Jackson, 2016). Work is the oft-recognized relationship between doing labor and being a worker within an industry for the purposes of capital exchange and personal and professional livelihood. Participants described their work alongside recent disciplinary frameworks for writing center labor, whether "everyday," "disciplinary," "intellectual," or "emotional" (Geller & Denny, 2013; Caswell, Grutsch McKinney, & Jackson, 2016).

In my study, the visible and invisible work of the participants departed distinctly from what we, in the writing center world, talk about when we talk about writing center work: The invisible work, in particular, extended beyond the field's researched parameters—for example, when a queer writing center director was the first to hear about a queer tutor's suicidal ideation. Or when a tutor came out as gay, transgender, or polyamorous and sought the queer director's immediate support. Or when the queer writing center director was the "go-to" person for all things queer on campus, such as students' experiences with sexual assault or tutors' fears about the impact the administration of former president Trump would have on queer and transgender communities. Or when interviewee Jeremy told me that our writing centers are not merely sites where queer activism may happen but are also spaces uniquely and queerly conducive to such endeavors, especially through tutor-training courses and empirical research. Or when it was up to interviewee Madeline to make the case to a workshop attendee that conversations about gender-neutral pronouns matter to writing center work.

---

[2] I use the words "work" and "labor" interchangeably throughout this article for readability though I understand the nuances of each term and have defined each in this section.

Participant stories give me pause in calling much of the work described in this article *emotional labor*, or "work that involves care, mentoring, or nurturing of others; work of building and sustaining relationships; work to resolve conflicts; [and] managing our display of emotion" (Caswell, Grutsch McKinney, & Jackson, 2016, p. 27). This is not to say that the labor discussed by the participants isn't without emotional implication or impact, nor that it departs completely from recent definitions. Rather than completely adopt the term "emotional labor," I prefer to extend forward recently defined labor taxonomies, for the term "emotional labor" does not account for the laborious violence inflicted upon some participants through bullying, for example, as this article will later showcase. Yet even when participants have experiences that are far from bullying, participants' identities are evoked—by tutors, by students, by their institutions, by themselves—to do particular kinds of work.

In this sense, the work of the queer participants in this study best aligned with what 1980s and subsequent social sciences research has identified as visible and invisible labor (Hochschild, 1983; Daniels, 1987; Poster, Crain, & Cherry, 2016). From this angle, *visible labor* is nameable, countable, measurable, and translatable to a job description for which a laborer is compensated and evaluated, whereas *invisible labor* accounts for work not often associated, understood, or recognized as generating capital for an institution but from which such labor elicits and capitalizes on identity, emotion, and embodiment from the institution's workers. From participant perspectives showcased in the next sections, holding a queer event, or being out and proud enough to be the institution's go-to person for queer world-making is certainly a visible act at an institution in inception, delivery, and embodiment. There's a visible embodied component to this work, yet most of this work is invisible to larger institutional forms of showing, accounting for, and getting credit institutionally for labor.

Methods

With a 2016 IWCA Research Grant, I conducted 20 interviews after obtaining Institutional Review Board approval. During semi-structured interviews, participant discussions ranged from 30 min. to 1 hr 30 min. in length, with open-ended questions focused on queer identity and writing center administration (see the Appendix for these questions). I first invited queer writing center directors who were publicly "out," either through information published in their research or in their research site's mission statements, who held full-time administrative or faculty roles at collegiate writing centers, but I recruited a majority of the participants through conversations at the 2016 and 2017 IWCA conferences and through snowball sampling. Snowball sampling uses recommendations from one participant to locate other potential participants; this strategy is well suited to the creation of a sample focused on similarities, in this case, LGBTQ identities (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan, & Hoagwood, 2015). I recorded interviews with my personal phone and my Macbook's recording application. Using the recordings, I took notes on each interview, logging selections and writing short vignettes about participants. I later had the interviews professionally transcribed, coding those transcriptions using NVivo10, a software program that enables researchers to analyze qualitative data such as interviews. I ran data queries on NVivo to identify emerging data patterns, and I coded for major themes that arose. Two related themes were labor and work, especially descriptions and discussions of and reactions to the work participants did as lead administrators.

Participants

This study, as evidenced in Table 1, showcased 20 participants, 11 of whom are male-identifying (10 of those participants are cisgender gay men, and one is a transgender man who is opposite-sex oriented); seven who are female-identifying and lesbian, pansexual, or queer; and 2 who are gender non-conforming and lesbian or queer. Participants hailed from varied institution types (at the post-secondary level, these included research-extensive, regional comprehensive, community college, and private institutions; a secondary level institution was also represented) and held diverse institutional roles, including tenure-stream or tenured faculty and full-time administrative staff positions. Despite a lack of gender and racial diversity in the writing center world, a claim corroborated by Sarah Banschbach Valles, Rebecca Day Babcock, & Karen Keaton Jackson (2018)[3], I was able to recruit male- and female-identifying participants, but just one transgender person. Even with snowball sampling and with my own active recruitment at conferences, I was not able to diversify my pool enough to get more than one trans voice. Yet, while just one participant identified as transgender, other participants did identify themselves or their practices as gender non-conforming, a gender expression that refuses traditional conceptions and performances of norms associated with being male or female in western culture. I also recruited two gay men of color. I asked both for support in snowball sampling. Both were open to doing so but struggled to name other queer people of color who direct writing centers. Thus, this study included just these two voices of color, neither of whom are women—a clear limitation.

---

[3] Based on 313 survey responses about national writing center demographics, Valles, Babcock, & Jackson (2018) revealed that 91.3% of participants were white, 70.5% female, and 28.5% male, percentages that reflect similar findings in the field's few studies on the topic. I point to this study to note a lack of diversity in the field as a whole. However, despite the writing center world being homogeneous across race and gender (i.e., made of up mostly white, female practitioners), this article and its queer participants do offer a diversity of perspectives.

All participants noted no problem with their names being used in this project. However, participants held varied relationships to current and past institutions and myriad position types, with some positions more secure than others. For these reasons, I provided pseudonyms because participants may not always continue to hold the same stances about anonymity, given prospective professional or personal changes that could arise later.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Name	Identification	Gender	Race	Position Type	Institution Type	Region
Adam	Gay	Male-identifying	White	Part-time administrator & adjunct faculty	Community college	Northeast
Amanda	Queer	Female-identifying	White	Staff administrator & adjunct faculty	Community college	Midwest
Brian	Gay	Male-identifying	Black	Tenured faculty administrator	Regional comprehensive	North/ Midwest
Cara	Lesbian	Female-identifying	White	Non-tenure track faculty administrator and instructional faculty	Research	North/ Midwest
Casey	Pansexual	Female-identifying	White	Pre-tenure faculty administrator	Private	Southeast
Dana	Queer	Gender noncomforming	White	Staff administrator	Research	Northeast
David	Gay	Male-identifying	White	Tenured faculty administrator	Community college	North/ Midwest
Jack	Transgender	Male-identifying	White	Staff administrator & adjunct faculty	Private	Midwest
James	Gay	Male-identifying	Black	Staff administrator	Community college	North
Jennifer	Lesbian	Female-identifying	White	Staff administrator	Regional comprehensive	Northeast

DOI: 10.7771/2832-9414.1959

Jeremy	Gay	Male-identifying	White	Pre-tenure faculty administrator	Regional comprehensive	North
John	Gay	Male-identifying	White	Tenured faculty administrator	Research	Southeast
Katherine	Lesbian	Female-identifying	White	Staff administrator and instructional faculty	Research	North/ Midwest
Leah	Lesbian	Female-identifying	White	Staff administrator and adjunct faculty	Research	North
Madeline	Lesbian	Female-identifying	White	Tenured faculty administrator	Research	South
Matt	Gay	Male-identifying	White	Part-time faculty administrator	Secondary	North
Mike	Gay	Male-identifying	White	Tenured faculty administrator	Research	North/ Midwest
Ryan	Gay	Male-identifying	White	Staff administrator & Non-tenure track faculty	Research	Northeast
Stephanie	Lesbian	Gender nonconforming	White	Staff administrator & adjunct faculty	Regional comprehensive	South
Tim	Gay	Male-identifying	White	Tenured faculty administrator	Regional comprehensive	North/ Midwest

Note. While the perspectives of all 20 voices inform the ideas and themes in this article, not all 20 participants are cited in the article beyond their appearance in this table. All participants are, however, cited in my book-length study, *Queerly Centered: LGBTQA Writing Center Directors Navigate the Workplace* (Webster, 2021). Selections from this article also appear in the book with permission from both venues.

Findings and Discussion: Queer Invisible Labor

As Grutsch McKinney (2013) has noted, writing center directors lead, mentor, write, read, research, consult, advocate, schedule, tutor, process staff compensation, and hold and attend meetings, among countless other work-related tasks (1–2). My participants noted each of these tasks—and also other tasks relatively "unsaid" in writing center research thus far (Caswell, Grutsch McKinney, & Jackson, 2016, p. 180). Informed by Caswell, Grutsch McKinney, & Jackson (2016), I share in this section interviewees' illustrative examples, which are a subset of responses focused on each theme. According to the reflection done by my participants, their work, which is already extensive as key researchers argue, also included the following unsaid experiences:

- responding to events impacting queer communities and/or using writing center sites as spaces for queer-related endeavors (scholarly, recreation, or otherwise);
- directly or indirectly experiencing queer-related bullying or mobbing; and
- mentoring and supporting tutors and students, queer and non-queer alike, for support with issues central to queer communities and/or mental health.

Finding 1: Responding to Queer-Related Events and Using Writing Center Sites as Queer Spaces

The first finding was that most participants discussed responding to events impacting queer communities and/or using writing center sites as (activist) spaces for queer-related endeavors (scholarly, recreation, or otherwise). For example, one participant, John, discussed the Pulse tragedy, in which a terrorist massacred 49 queer people and injured another 53 on June 12, 2016, which was "Latin Night" at Orlando's Pulse, an LGBTQ nightclub. He noted that following this event, his fellow faculty and staff members struggled to talk through their emotions, with his institution turning to policy and protocol to respond to the tragedies. Following these institutional meetings, he said,

> It was so weird because I'd come back to the writing center. Of course, that's what students wanted to talk about and so, that's where we came up with the idea of just having an afternoon where we would invite anyone to come and write and share their writing. Whatever they got and whatever they wrote was fair game and it was so emotional and hard, but the writing center became a place where people could talk about the stuff they weren't talking about elsewhere.

John talked about making space in the writing center for difficult conversations related to local traumas, noting later that he believed his queer identity made him attuned to this kind of space-making work in the first place. As a gay, White

https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/wcj/vol39/iss1/4

DOI: 10.7771/2832-9414.1959

man, however, he said he struggled at first with responding to the Pulse murders because the shooting primarily impacted people of color and transgender people. John's tutors, he said, assuaged these fears, saying that everyone on the writing center team, John and his tutors of all orientations, could nurture the community's traumas through proactive space-making.

Another participant, Brian, also said he made queer space. He stated he was one of just a few Black professionals on his campus. There, he said, he was recognized as the "big scary Black guy," and he added that his style of leadership as a no-nonsense, non-nurturing leader was not well-represented or recognized on site or in the writing center world more generally. Perhaps unintentionally, he juxtaposed this image of the "scary," no-nonsense, queer Black man running his campus's writing center with a discussion of how he offered up his writing center space as a queer space. He described his center, unlike other offices at his predominantly White institution (PWI), as a place that represented tutors and staff of all identity intersections. He explained he especially made space for Black students, tutors, and professionals just to meet up, for there was not another, on-campus space like that or like his. John and Brian both indicated they made space for queer and of color writing center stakeholders, whether students, tutors, or colleagues. In this sense, such work can be tricky. How does a queer director undertake the work of holding a Pulse event or a space for Black and queer space-making, even as this work is often invisible? How can this work be made visible or counted in order to propel forward these directors' work lives as well as the writing center profession?

A gay male director, Tim, also said his writing center responded to broader campus issues in part because other offices did not. He noted his institution did not have a campus health center, and, as a result, celebrations of events like World AIDS Day were not part of the institutional landscape during his early years at his site. Therefore, he explained, his center hosted an annual commemorative AIDS Day event at which condoms made an appearance and became part of the center's quotidian landscape:

> There was no place for those condoms to go, so we've had condoms in the Writing Center ever since, which gets weird looks sometimes. I don't know where else to put them [on campus], but I want them to be somewhere.

In this sense, Tim spoke of the writing center as a de-facto site for safety and inclusion, quite literally. Taking a similar professional risk, Jack, a transgender director, recalled his invitation to participate in a Gay-Straight Alliance panel at his previous institution. He said he took the opportunity to participate in order to call out local transphobia. He said as a member of the panel, he brought up transgender suicides rates and pushed the audience to consider its role in making a better world for trans people. Despite the initial discomfort Jack said he felt in making this remark, he said he felt it necessary to speak up, which connects him to a queer and trans lineage of queer people speaking up for each other. He told me:

> Maybe [an audience member's] kid in fifteen years comes out as trans, and they're not happy about it, and they wish it weren't the case. But maybe they'll remember me and think, "Maybe I don't have to be scared that my kid is going to be unhappy and be beaten up or whatever." I'm not a director who gets up on the pulpit. I will if somebody asks me to. But mostly it's so just, if you're in somebody's life, make sure you're doing whatever it is so that when they wake up tomorrow morning, the first thing they think of isn't, "I don't know why I should get up."

These participants' work is not only the work of administrative leadership but also the work of acting when others (namely other campus offices or institutions themselves) will not act, when tragedies happen, or when Black stakeholders at a PWI have no space to call their own. A certain activism and advocacy exist in such labor. Jack said he hoped his leadership would hold space for more livable, gratifying, and safer lives for transgender people and those who love them. Similarly, John's site acting as an outlet for trauma and Brian's queer and Black space-making are, at face value, beautiful representations of what writing centers can be and how centers can move beyond tutoring writers, changing what Grutsch McKinney (2013) called the "writing center grand narrative" (pp. 65–80), which tends to leave out stories of underrepresented populations. Simultaneously, however, the field must also interrogate which directors are most likely to engage in such labor and the implications of that engagement. At present, those most likely to do this labor, whether or not they have the capacity to do it, may be the field's most vulnerable members. If we in the field take up recent disciplinary calls to understand and respond to our sites alongside the political moments in which we find ourselves (Grimm, 1999; Denny, 2005, 2010; Geller, Eodice, Condon, Carroll, & Boquet, 2007; Greenfield & Rowan, 2011; Goins & Heard, 2012; Hallman Martini & Webster, 2017), we must also recognize the inherent labor exerted upon queer bodies to do this work.

At this point, readers may feel the need to poke at my arguments, thinking, "I do that. Any director could or would do that work." There may even be raised eyebrows at condoms in writing centers and at writing center directors addressing trangender suicide rates in public forums. But queer and transgender people have trying histories with medical and psychiatric institutions and world health crises and epidemics, which have led to centuries' worth of deaths. Death has come from late 19th century medical writing that rendered queer people psychologically damaged and gave rise to modern conceptions of conversion violence (Blakemore, 2019). Death has come from that same medical writing that described a homo/hetero binary (Katz, 1995), a binary that later erased, pathologized, and punished homosexual identity, leading to

DOI: 10.7771/2832-9414.1959

a century of suicides and ignored medical epidemics. Death has come from a June 5, 1981, epidemiological note in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* detailing five cases of mortality from *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia for five otherwise healthy Los Angeles gay men (Gottlieb, Schanker, Fan, Saxon, & Weisman, 1981), a report that adumbrated thousands of deaths before medical or political stakeholders acted in support of queer people. Death has come from 21st century demagoguery that willfully misrepresents transgender people, leading to an epidemic of transgender violence and fatality. Queer people historically have had to act because no one else would and have had to act in the way Jack did when speaking out about transgender suicide and how Tim did by putting out condoms in his writing center when his university turned a blind eye to students' sexual health. To distribute condoms, to craft spaces where sexual health resources are prominent alongside tutoring and student support, was, perhaps, a means for these directors to complicate the work of the writing center. I do not think this attention to sexual health ought to be the work of all writing centers, but I do think we, in the discipline, must challenge the orthodoxies of our labor, recognizing that our work may not be easily parsed out: Radical work (Greenfield 2019) may be the work we have to do, and queer people may feel a particular, nuanced responsibility to such labor based on historic precedence. The queer directors I interviewed did this work by living out and alongside an embodied history. One participant, Cara, told the story of how, in the 1980s, her longtime high school friend who departed the South after graduation came home to die of AIDS. She said she never got a chance to say goodbye to him and that his parents would not name his ailment or allow visitors. During the same time period, Mike, another participant, was a fearful but committed young AIDS organizer watching the horrors of what a "gay epidemic" could do to a community of queer men. Isn't it the case that anyone can put out condoms in their writing center? Certainly. But does this embodied labor of memory mean something quite different for many of these queer directors? Most certainly.

Finding 2: Queer-Related Bullying

The second finding was that a quarter of participants noted directly or indirectly experiencing queer-related bullying or mobbing with regularity. For example, Mike said that, at his previous institution, colleagues, students, and tutors regularly used slurs to describe him privately or publicly. Institutional histories and politics made him the brunt of bullying and mobbing that took many forms, he said. He explained that in his early career, he started off with dreams of helping tutors and students as a queer, justice-focused director, but he said he refrained as the years progressed there, despite his hailing from the world of grassroots organizing. He stated that he reclaimed his natural orientations in his administrative identity at a new institution, but he said he formerly suffered from "scrappy dog syndrome" as a queer administrator: He felt that work was something more to survive than to relish while being regularly targeted, bullied, mobbed, and slurred when he made himself open and vulnerable. Such work—that of experiencing and dealing with bullying—impacts all facets of administrative life, he said, from daily endeavors and a center's success (or failure) to an administrator's research productivity.

Another participant, Adam, who described himself as someone "who doesn't fit the cultural definition of masculinity," also experienced on-the-job bullying, though what he described was not as intense as the bullying Mike noted. Adam said a few student athletes felt they could take out their frustrations with writing center policy on his perceived sexuality and filed a complaint against him. These experiences did not stop with students: He described an instance in which colleagues either underestimated him as a pushover or oddly and ironically made comments to his close peers about being able to "win him over," using a pseudo-sexual connotation. Such instances, Adam said, forced him to adopt a "Joan Crawford" mentality when interacting with some of his colleagues:

> I had a little pin that was on my bulletin board, a little corner of my bulletin board above my desk that said, "Fear the queer."… I totally… [channeled] some of this Joan Crawford, end of the show, "don't [mess] with me fellas" kind of thing.

Similarly, Tim, though he described himself as tenured and quite privileged, said he experienced a few raised eyebrows, albeit to a lesser degree than Adam or Mike. Tim explained that following Donald Trump's presidential election, his university community experienced rustling on both sides of the political aisle. As a representative on a campus LGBTQ taskforce, Tim noted he was aware of instances of vandalism and violence upon queer people and people of color from students who felt empowered by the messages of Trump's 2016 election platform. Tim said when he made a public statement calling out the instances, university police called him out for supposedly misreporting, saying no such instances had taken place. He said such instances had not been reported technically, but he knew they had taken place and trusted the descriptions he had heard.

Two other participants, Stephanie and Amanda, both mentioned unspoken insinuations from straight, female colleagues who made homophobic or transphobic statements about local, national, or global events, causing Stephanie and Amanda to say they assumed similar homophobic sentiments were directed at themselves. Both noted they had lunch with colleagues who verbally agreed aloud with homophobic, conservative media that was playing in the break rooms on campus where they were eating. Overall, three gay male participants noted explicit bullying, while two female participants noted casual, implicit bullying. It seems that bullying of LGBTQ writing center directors is distressingly common but that participants' sex may influence the nature of that bullying.

The labor conditions for a few of the participants made it impossible for them to continue administrative work. Mike said he left his previous job, as did Adam and Brian. In this sense, we, in the writing center world, may be losing critical practitioner voices to unsavory, if not violent, labor conditions, such as the bullying described by some of the participants. What we, as writing center researchers, are calling emotional labor, that which is grounded in conflict mediation and interpersonal resolution (Caswell, Grutsch McKinney, & Jackson, 2016, pp. 23–27), does not account for the labor inherent in a toxic, homophobic environment. Even worse, the term "emotional labor" does not account for the gaslighting[4] that takes place as a result of doing labor in such toxic environments: The current landscape presumes that such forms of homophobia no longer occur and that academia is immune to such aggressions and oppressions in the first place. To do one's work alongside such a landscape is also labor—an invisible labor—that we, in the writing center field, have not explicitly addressed in scholarship, except, on occasion, at our national conference venues, which by definition are exclusive sites, given that the resources, such as funding for travel and registration fees as well as time away from the writing center, are needed for attendance and participation.

The reality is that the experience of having to navigate and respond to explicit bullying is not merely an offshoot of the work. It is work. Navigating the minefield that is academia through the world of writing centers, which are often nationally and institutionally misunderstood, is labor in and of itself. Adding "fag" slurs and tensions with straight men and women to the mix is an embodied work for bullied, queer directors. Simply put, in the writing center world, queer people may be targets of bullying. In many ways, this targeting is not new, despite western progressive shifts. Not only western cultures but also other global cultures, especially those under homophobic, transphobic, and populist executive administrations, do not herald, respect, or seek to extend basic rights to queer people. Transgender people are more likely to be murdered, as are queer people, even in an age of marriage equality—the touchstone event that often culturally presupposes that queer and LGBTQ rights are attained; that fights for human rights are over; and that queer people ought to be happy, settled, and at peace with western and global landscapes.

All of this is to say that non-queer writing center practitioners may gasp, wince, or eye-roll at my suggested link between explicit bullying, queer death, and writing centers. Yet I would be surprised if queer writing center practitioners reading this section would blink. They may have even seen similar instances in their own centers. Denny (in a 2010 WCenter listserv post as cited in Rihn & Sloan, 2013) and Denny, Mundy, Naydan, Sévère, & Sicari (2018) reminded practitioners that the world plays out in our writing centers, especially in sites that house one-to-one human interaction, with Rebecca Hallman Martini's & my (2017) suggesting that bravery, not safety, is a writing center's only survival vehicle for its stakeholders. If we, in the discipline, do not take such scholarship to heart, the work of 21st century writing centers may be haunted by queer violence. If we do take such scholarship to heart, writing center work could have an immense impact on workers whose bodies cannot easily ignore the news or turn a blind eye when their own bodies are intertwined, implicated, and invoked by such violence. In a world in which queer people, especially those of color and of transgender identity, can be beaten or shot at random in public places, it is not a stretch to say that the "bravery" theories of recent writing center research hold metaphorical and material weight on and within working lives. Beyond the conventional parameters of writing center work, the weight of a national landscape ripe with violent tension cannot be separated from our work sites.

---

[4] Linked to power dynamics and systemic oppression of minorities, the increasingly mainstream term *gaslighting* describes how a person, group, or entity causes, through psychological manipulation, another person, group, or entity to question their lived experiences, especially related to truth, memory, and perception.

Finding 3: Mentoring and Supporting Tutors and Students with Queer Endeavors

The third finding was that a majority of participants reported mentoring tutors and students, queer and non-queer alike, and providing support with issues central to queer communities and/or mental health. A gay male administrator, John, said his gay identity equipped him for the profession's "more complex vision about writing center work," referring to the field's recent scholarship on social justice, in particular work that has taken up subversion (Denny, 2010) and bravery (Hallman Martini & Webster, 2017). In fact, he recalled once loaning money to a gay couple on his tutoring staff. He said these tutors were doing all the right things—working, saving, and moving toward promising lives and fruitful careers—but that circumstances seemed stacked against them as young, queer people facing oppression. He noted he felt his financial support would offer a necessary boost. It did not go well at first, he said, but it eventually ironed out. He added that he did not expect repayment but that one of the pair eventually paid him back.

In a similar vein, Stephanie said a writer sought her support by locating her online administrator biography and scheduling a tutoring appointment with her. She noted the writer specifically sought her out because, based on her online profile that included her picture (she identified and presented as gender non-conforming), he thought she could help. She explained the writer, who was working on an application for a nationally recognized competitive

DOI: 10.7771/2832-9414.1959

internship, brought in his application essay, which Stephanie said was about male-to-male sexual assault the writer had experienced. She said,

> It was a competitive internship. And he really wanted this essay to be powerful, but also really well written. And he was concerned that he didn't want it to seem like he was drawing too much on his own experiences and not seeing the broader picture. And I remember, as I was working with him on it, that it was really hard for me, as a queer person, to sit down with him and listen to this, or interact with this experience that he'd had, in a sort of writerly manner. You know, like, "Let's look at this as writing" because it was so personal, and it felt like it was so close to home for me.

This writer's perception of safety when working with her made her feel "proud and happy," she said, but she also called the session "heavy stuff […] that is really kind of emotionally taxing."

Another participant, Casey, a pansexual director, said she worked with queer-identifying writing tutors who sought her support on typical day-to-day endeavors such as client interactions and tutoring practices, but she also said her labor extended beyond this: Her own disclosures about the site's social justice mission and her pan and polyamorous orientations often signalled a culture of safety, comfort, and disclosure, she said. She explained that tutors have come out to her about their sexual orientation as well as about their mental health. Casey reflected broadly on such discussions:

> To have queer students come to me and tell me that they're suicidal. To be the person that they are telling at their moment of intervention, for me that is the most important thing that I will ever do in my life probably ever. It sits in a writing center and it sits in the moment of a writing center and a community of writing centers that was built using this queer approach. That's Harry Denny. That's fucking embodiment. That's why this matters. Right?

Casey spoke to queer labor unexamined in writing center research, addressing a lineage to this kind of work, namely, "Harry Denny" and "a community of writing centers" framed in queer orientations. This work is not about helping writers, she noted, so much as about building a culture and "community" where queer disclosure is a norm and that supports tutors who ultimately support fellow students and universities. The tutor disclosure likely took place because of Casey's own modeling of such articulations and trust. Casey noted that once she came out about her own mental health and sexual orientation, tutors of all orientations did the same. It is worth mentioning that, unlike Denny, Casey was pre-tenure and did not hold the power inherent in a research-intensive job at a flagship institution, which is also to say that she was brave (editors' note: for more on limitations associated with contingent labor, see Hall & Ryan, this issue). Casey embraced the labor, but had to, she said, on occasion, "shut [her] door" to set regular boundaries. "I can't be the queer writing center director with a queer social justice administrative lens like one more minute of the day. Not that I'm not going to come back tomorrow," she told me. John's earlier mention of the writing center discipline's "more complex visions" for its work is not without its embodied labor: Casey setting boundaries speaks to such complexity. Yet her administrative philosophy was one that responded to queer tutors alongside issues pertinent to queer communities, such as suicide rates and mental health. She acted when others didn't and wouldn't, and perhaps because, as we have seen, she had to.

Another participant, Dana, told stories that echoed Casey's. She said her writing center mentorship pedagogy revolved around practices of making space for conversations that may impact queer communities, as many of her tutors were LGBTQ. Like Casey, she explained that she had come out to tutors in varied ways, sometimes related to queerness, but sometimes not. On modeling an out, open leadership style, Dana said,

> Students come out as bipolar and having PTSD.... Although this is both a blessing and a curse, and has nothing specifically to do with queerness but, being seen as that person that students can come to with those vulnerable things, not specifically related to queerness but, I am for better or for worse their go to adult for everything [including] if they have been raped on campus this year.

Dana made an interesting claim here in articulating that these disclosures had "nothing specifically to do with queerness." Taken as an isolated instance, such a disclosure could impact any writing center practitioner. Yet Dana, as Casey did, linked queer identity to issues of mental health because of systemic implicit and explicit oppressions that still plague LGBTQ communities. Further, these participants reported that their queerness and queer openness also signalled non-queer tutors and students to disclose some of their many identities, to come out, and to seek a queer mentor regularly. In this sense, Dana and Casey were out in ways that made space for disclosure, safety, and bravery from students and tutors of myriad backgrounds and orientations.

In this sense, these participants teach us, as disciplinary practitioners, that queer writing center directors' work is complex. Such directors are mentors to queer tutors and students, helping with queer life, loans, writing about sexual assault, queer mental health, and even a tutor's suicidal ideation. Such directors may also disclose their own positionalities. On the one hand, queer writing center directors would do this work without being asked (as all participants expressed). But on the other hand, even while this work is often invigorating and meaningful, it is also sometimes invisibly and emotionally taxing and "uncountable." In other words, this laborious work did not yet count in any verifiable way for these directors, despite participants' unflagging support for queer tutors and students—a predicament that makes for a complicated dynamic. Certainly, writing center directors at large can not "count" every task, every email, or every instance such as the examples in this section; yet with the intertwining of queer bodies and writing administrative work, what counts and what directors supposedly "should" be doing as leaders (i.e., helping writers, leading tutors, balancing budgets, reading and writing scholarship) remains uncertain. The question becomes, What are the implications of this invisible work for these participants and for the discipline itself?

Conclusion

What has been discussed in this article is, I would argue, fairly common knowledge to queer directors and regularly regarded as disciplinary lore by non-queer ones. I do not question disciplinary lore as some writing center research has (Driscoll & Wynn Perdue, 2012), but I do feel that an empirical glimpse into the experiential as provided by this article was critical and necessary. Queer directors can "preach to the choir" through collective, affirmative head-nodding at national conferences and special interest groups, but participants of varied orientations and institutional standings corroborating this "mere lore"—the narrative that queer directors may experience administration differently and may interface with distinct kinds of labor—offers empirical recognition of such queer writing center work.

The participants' labor represents a continuum from being heralded institutionally as diverse, respected voices to being bullied at the workplace. Queer writing center directors can be perceived by university stakeholders—tutors, students, and colleagues—as "queer unicorns" or as respected practitioners pedastaled for their diverse bodies and voices. During one interview, a participant and I said in unison, "It's like we're unicorns." I made note of that descriptor and use it here to describe the administrative phenomenon of being cast as mythical, if not "perfect," seemingly rare representations of diversity, but often White and passing "enough" to be perceived as recognizable, benign, and sometimes easily malleable (read: manipulated) to heteronormative institutions. Such institutional "love" seemed to arise only from White participant data; neither participant of color offered a story that would position them as "unicorns," despite their tireless labor on behalf of their queer and non-queer tutors, their students, their centers, and their institutions.

I am certain no participant would entirely forego such invisible labor, with the exception of withstanding bullying, but it is worth mentioning that this work falls with intensity on queer directors. Of course, it would be problematic speculation to claim that non-queer directors do not perform nuanced, intensive, invisible labor that aligns with their identity; they do this labor to some extent, especially our colleagues of color. In this sense, this article is in conversation with such recent work as *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*'s special issue, "Race in the Writing Center" (Riddick & Hooker, 2019), Romeo García's (2017) "Unmaking Gringo-Centers," and Neisha-Anne Green's (2018) influential IWCA conference keynote calling for accompliceship over alliance, the latter two printed in *The Writing Center Journal*. Such race-focused conversations mirror those in the work of several scholars in Laura Greenfield & Karen Rowan's collection, *Writing Centers and the New Racism: A Call for Sustainable Dialogue and Change* (2011), including Vershawn Ashanti Young (2011) and Anne E. Geller, Frankie Condon, & Meg Carroll (2011), as well as the work of Wonderful Faison, Talisha Haltiwanger Morrison, Katie Levin, Elijah Simmons, Jasmine Kar Tang, & Keli Tucker (2019), whose scholarship stems from the work of an IWCA antiracism special interest group. With such research in mind, I return to John, the participant in this study who, when reflecting on recent writing center scholarship and orientations, said that he was pleased with how the field of writing center studies is diversifying and extending how it takes up writing center work, telling me that he felt his gay identity made him "more available to that conversation in the first place"—a mantra present in recent work about race and writing centers.

Conversely, and perhaps surprisingly, I see no need to call for disciplinary change, nor to suggest collective action for queer writing center directors to adapt their administrative approaches, to delegate this labor to others, or to balance it with other colleagues. I realize the controversy in such a statement, but queer writing center directors, such as those in this study, are uniquely equipped for this work. Who does and is asked to do this labor is complex, as is how tutors, students, and peers gravitate toward certain directors in the first place. Should labor among writing centers, departments, and collegiate units be distributed more evenly, with less burden upon queer people? Of course. Is it unlikely that queer directors will suddenly abandon or shift their attention from these labors, and even further unlikely that straight, White, male writing center directors, for example, will take on these kinds of labors? Of course. In fact, the reality is that such changes to these labor dynamics would be awkward, if not null, especially for those tutors, students, and fellow directors for whom queer writing center administrative labor makes a critical difference. In this sense, the field must respond to such realities as they are in order to better support queer writing center directors.

To support these professionals, the discipline's flagship and regional organizations must make more space for intentional, queer writing center mentorship across institution types and experience backgrounds. The IWCA has an LGBTQ standing group for practitioners to meet and discuss their writing centers' queer issues. I formerly co-chaired this standing group and recognize the value and history of its mission. But, while fruitful, conversations that take place during this standing group's meetings often do not leave the conference site, and the meetings are often merely venues for airing necessary grievances about home institutions. Further, while IWCA's Mentor Match Program does, indeed, account for queer identities when matching professionals, I wonder how we, as a profession, may take up such initiatives more intentionally, across our sites and our affiliations. Perhaps our IWCA Summer Institutes could explicitly name and afford resources and mentorship support for such labor. As we listen to the invisible labors articulated by the practitioners in this study, we must use the knowledge we gain from their stories to better prepare practitioners for the kinds of labors that queer directors may face. We must identify ways not to change the labor exerted on queer practitioners, but to proactively predict and mitigate the work that faces queer directors.

While this article does not deal with the participants' research, we can infer that their invisible labor takes time and emotional energy that could otherwise be devoted to scholarship. With this labor in mind, the IWCA must take the lead from its disciplinary affiliates that regularly provide significant funding for queer projects and researchers, such as the Conference on College Composition and Communication's (CCCC) Scholars for the Dream Travel Award, the Stonewall Service Award, and the Lavender Rhetorics Award for Excellence in Queer Scholarship (CCCC, n.d.). The IWCA Research Grant did recognize a queer project in 2016 (this one), though a continued focus on queer projects could ensure that queer practitioners receive resources to account for and propel scholarly production that otherwise runs the risk of being slowed or stifled by invisible labor. Geller & Denny (2013) reminded writing center practitioners that "we become agents in our own intellectual/disciplinary marginalization if we are not disseminating scholarly knowledge through publication and are instead mired only in everyday intellectual labor" (p. 120). Such attention to queer researchers may afford our field more diverse perspectives, especially through queer and raced research in writing centers. The extent to which our disciplinary organizations could support not only research but also queer folks' advancement through these distinct labors, whether for tenure navigation, research funding, or professional development, is of utmost importance.

At this point, non-queer directors may say, "My work is linked to my identity, too," especially non-queer women and people of color. While in agreement with such a claim, I argue that the labor described by the participants in this study is distinct from what the writing center field talks about when referring to work. I invite colleagues into a new collective disciplinary awareness that, I hope, will lead to equitable labor conditions for queer practitioners whose work may depart invisibly from disciplinary norms.

Acknowledgments
I appreciate the immeasurable support of the WCJ editorial team, the anonymous reviewers, Rebecca Hallman Martini, Harry Denny, Michelle Miley, and, of course, the fabulous project participants.

References

Blakemore, E. (2019, June 28). *Gay conversion therapy's disturbing 19th-century origins.* History. https://www.history.com/news/gay-conversion-therapy-origins-19th-century

Caswell, N. I., Grutsch McKinney, J., & Jackson, R. (2016). *The working lives of new writing center directors*. Utah State University Press.

Conference on College Composition & Communication. (n.d.). *CCCC grants and awards.* https://cccc.ncte.org/cccc/awards

Daniels, A. K. (1987). Invisible work. *Social Problems, 34*(5), 403–415. https://doi.org/10.2307/800538

Denny, H. (2005). Queering the writing center. *Writing Center Journal, 25*(2), 39–62.

Denny, H. C. (2010). *Facing the center: Toward an identity politics of one-to-one mentoring*. Utah State University Press. https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/usupress_pubs/168

Denny, H. (2013). A queer eye for the WPA. *WPA: Writing Program Administration, 37*(1), 186–198. http://associationdatabase.co/archives/37n1/37n1denny.pdf

Denny, H., Mundy, R., Naydan, L. M., Sévère, R., & Sicari, A. (2018). *Out in the center: Public controversies and private struggles*. Utah State University Press.

Doucette, J. (2011). Composing queers: The subversive potential of the writing center. *Young Scholars in Writing, 8,* 5–15. https://youngscholarsinwriting.org/index.php/ysiw/article/view/106

Driscoll, D. L., & Wynn Perdue, S. (2012). Theory, lore, and more: An analysis of RAD research in *The Writing Center Journal*, 1980–2009. *Writing Center Journal, 32*(2), 11–39.

Eodice, M. (2010). Introduction to "Queering the Writing Center." *Writing Center Journal, 30*(1), 92–94.

Faison, W., Morrison, T. H., Levin, K., Simmons, E., Tang, J. K., & Tucker, K. (2019). Potential for and barriers to actionable antiracism in the writing center: Views from the IWCA Special Interest Group on Antiracism Activism. *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal, 16*(2). https://www.praxisuwc.com/162-faison-et-al

García, R. (2017). Unmaking gringo-centers. *Writing Center Journal, 36*(1), 29–60.

Geller, A. E., & Denny, H. (2013). Of ladybugs, low status, and loving the job: Writing center professionals navigating their careers. *Writing Center Journal, 33*(1), 96–129.

Geller, A. E., Condon, F., & Carroll, M. (2011). Bold: The everyday writing center and the production of new knowledge in antiracist theory and practice. In L. Greenfield & K. Rowan (Eds.), *Writing centers and the new racism: A call for sustainable dialogue and change* (101–23). Utah State University Press.

Geller, A. E., Eodice, M., Condon, F., Carroll, M., & Boquet, E. H. (2007). *The everyday writing center: A community of practice*. Utah State University Press.

Goins, E., & Heard, F. C. (2012). From the editors—Diverse people, diverse approaches. *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal, 10*(1). https://www.praxisuwc.com/from-the-editors-101

Gottlieb, M. S., Schanker, H. M., Fan, P. T., Saxon, A., & Weisman, A. (1981). *Pneumocystis* pneumonia—Los Angeles. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, 30*(21), 1–3. https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/june_5.htm

Green, N.-A. (2018). Moving beyond alright: And the emotional toll of this, my life matters too, in the writing center work. *Writing Center Journal, 37*(1), 15–34.

Greenfield, L. (2019). *Radical writing center praxis: A paradigm for ethical political engagement*. Utah State University Press.

Greenfield, L., & Rowan, K. (2011). *Writing centers and the new racism: A call for sustainable dialogue and change*. Utah State University Press.

Grimm, N. (1999). *Good intentions: Writing center work for postmodern times*. Heinemann.

Grutsch McKinney, J. (2013). *Peripheral visions for writing centers*. Utah State University Press.

Hallman Martini, R., & Webster, T. (2017). Writing centers as brave/r spaces: A special issue introduction. *Peer Review, 1*(2). https://thepeerreview-iwca.org/issues/braver-spaces/writing-centers-as-braver-spaces-a-special-issue-introduction/

Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling.* University of California Press.

Katz, J. N. (1995). *The invention of heterosexuality.* Dutton.

Palinkas, L. A., Horwitz, S. M., Green, C. A., Wisdom, J. P., Duan, N., & Hoagwood, K. (2015). Purposeful sampling for qualitative data collection and analysis in mixed method implementation research. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research, 42*(5), 533–544. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y

Poster, W. R., Crain, M., & Cherry, M. A. (2016). Introduction: Conceptualizing invisible labor. In M. Crain, W. R. Poster, & M. A. Cherry (Eds.), *Invisible labor: Hidden work in the contemporary world* (pp. 3–27). University of California Press.

Riddick, S. & Hooker, T. (Eds.). (2019). Race & the writing center [Special issue]. *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal, 16*(2). https://www.praxisuwc.com/162-links-page

Rihn, A. J., & Sloan, J. D. (2013). "Rainbows in the past were gay":LGBTQIA in the WC. *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal, 10*(2). https://www.praxisuwc.com/rihn-sloan-102

Valles, S. B., Babcock, R. D., & Jackson, K. K. (2017). Writing center administrators and diversity: A survey. *Peer Review, 1*(1). http://thepeerreview-iwca.org/issues/issue-1/writing-center-administrators-and-diversity-a-survey

Webster, T. (2021). *Queerly centered: LGBTQA writing center directors navigate the workplace*. Utah State University Press.

Young, V. A. (2011). Should writers use they own English? In L. Greenfield & K. Rowan (Eds.), *Writing centers and the new racism: A call for sustainable dialogue and change* (pp. 61–72). Utah State University Press.

Appendix A
Interview Questions

LGBTQ people often have a story related to their coming out process. If you're comfortable doing so, would you share an abbreviated version of that story?

How did you come to have a professional life in a writing center?

How do those two aspects of your identity complement or conflict with each other?

Tell me about a time when being LGBTQ has impacted your experience in your writing center, or when a writing center experience impacted your experience as a LGBTQ person.

Describe a moment where you felt tension or conflict around being WC director and LGBTQ?

Describe a moment where you felt at ease or resolved around being WC director and LGBTQ?

How might your LGBTQ identity impact your conscious, administrative choices (about philosophies, practices, pedagogies, and theories) in your writing center?

Do you have anything you would like to add to your interview today, or others I might speak with?

Travis Webster is Assistant Professor of Rhetoric and Writing at Virginia Tech. He is the author of *Queerly Centered: LGBTQA Writing Center Directors Navigate the Workplace* (Utah State UP, 2021). His research also appears in *College Composition and Communication, WPA: Writing Program Administration, The Peer Review*, and several collections. He has worked in and with writing centers since 2002.

https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/wcj/vol39/iss1/4
DOI: 10.7771/2832-9414.1959